Does your continuity plan hold water or will it be powerless to help when the rains come?

Linda Young discusses contingency plans for dental practices

The last two British summers have been memorable for many businesses in the UK for a number of reasons: London 2012, Her Majesty The Queen's Diamond Jubilee celebrations, floods, riots, fuel shortages, storms and power blackouts were just a few of the events that disrupted businesses across the length and breadth of the country.

Whilst it is possible to predict when and how some man made events are likely to cause disruption to your practice, a natural disaster cannot be predicted and so poses a real challenge to businesses. What can a business do to plan for the unknown; the ‘What if’ scenario?

No Plan

Over the years I have worked in businesses that have had to temporarily cease trading for a variety of reasons, all of which were beyond their control. A very cold winter froze the locks of one business’ only access door, which meant that nobody could get into the premises. There was no continuity plan and no one knew what to do! The staff, including me, arrived for work totally unaware of the problem; we were left standing outside in the bitter cold. The locksmith didn’t arrive until midday. We had no other option but to direct our customers to the competitor’s business next door!

Gale force winds blew part of the roof off a relatively new building in which I was working. People working beneath the damaged roof were moved. The engineers could not access the roof area until the high winds subsided. The staff affected continued their shifts ‘working from home’. The ability for these people to remotely connect to the main servers had been part of that business’ continuity plan, resulting in negligible disruption to service levels.

Computer hardware and software failures, theft and server down times regularly can cause disruption to services for both staff and customers alike. Even the biggest company can get this wrong, look at NatWest’s recent experience! Having good backup systems in place will pay dividends.

Personnel

Losing personnel through illness poses a serious risk to the smooth running of a practice. Episodes of contagious viral illnesses unfortunately cannot be avoided, but can reduce staffing levels to the point where only a basic service can be delivered. It is not only your own staff who might be affected by a ‘flu epidemic’; remember that the availability of agency staff will also be reduced. Keep details of all staff, their skills and past experience in the plan; these skills could be called upon to help out in an emergency.

Many practices have a lottery syndicate of which the nurses and receptionist are all members. What would happen on a Monday morning if the syndicate had won on the Saturday night? If the win was substantial then I doubt they would report for work!

Virtual

If using a ‘virtual receptionist’ service appeals to a practice, and both premises could be affected by the same event; too far apart may cause a logistical problem for staff, patients and suppliers alike. A practice can’t set up shop in the spare room in someone’s home even in the short term, so consider a reciprocal arrangement with another practice. The short notice change in location can be overcome by ensuring good communication with patients and suppliers, and perhaps the provision of a bus shuttle service for the patients, which would have to be agreed with the transport provider and, of course, noted in the continuity plan. Test the service regularly to ensure connectivity and that it meets the practice personnel’s needs.

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Critical documents and information held on computer may already have been copied and backed up, but where are the copies and back-ups kept? Store them locally and they may also be affected or destroyed by the disaster, or may be inaccessible because the area is cordoned off. Installing a fire proof safe in the practice to safeguard documents that are in the short to medium term irreplaceable is a good idea. This will safeguard them against theft and fire, but will not protect them against a flood. Perhaps a set of certified copies should be stored off site.

Back up

A practice’s ability to react quickly to any incident that affects their ability to trade is critical. The secret to achieving this is in continuity planning, and regularly reviewing the continuity plan to ensure it is still accurate and relevant. A good continuity plan should take into account all the practices’ resources ie its premises, services, technology and people.

Making continuity planning part of the way a practice operates helps prepare for ‘business as usual’ in the quickest possible time. This is preferable to dealing with the disaster should it ever happen. Having a tried and tested plan helps protect the practice against the impact of a man made or natural event, or disaster.

There are plenty of online sites eager to share their ideas
on how to draw up a plan. The time invested in collating all the information required for the plan at this stage could be one of the best investments a practice has ever made. The things that seem to be very simple now, when the practice is operating without any problems, could be insurmountable in the event of a crisis.

Level of detail
There are no hard and fast rules as to how long or short a continuity plan has to be. The level of detail in the plan is down to the continuity plan manager, who should never assume that everyone will still be around or be able to remember the essential processes, telephone numbers etc. So that your practice can continue to function without its premises and / or key personnel ensure that all the day to day activities and processes are all documented, and that they are all reviewed regularly.

At the same time think about processes that would only come into force if the continuity plan were activated.

Testing
Once the plan has been written and carefully checked think about testing it. Don’t be complacent and think that once the plan has been written it cannot be changed. To assume this is to take a big risk. Even the simplest and smallest of plans will have some amendments. Make sure the plan is kept up to date by reviewing it, even down to the smallest detail. Test the plan on a regular basis, combining this with a team building exercise. Make the testing scenario as realistic as possible, change the theme each time it’s tested from loss of premises, to people, to services and technology. Look at the impact of short-term losses to the medium and longer term. Keep a diary of the outcomes of each test so that key information that arises during each test isn’t forgotten about and can be built into the plan to improve the process.

Success
This article is not meant to be about how to write a practice continuity plan: it’s about thinking outside the box; thinking around all those decisions that will have to be made and which will make the difference to a plan, and your business’ ability to carry on trading.

Success in a crisis isn’t about good luck: it’s about good management continuity planning. Good management of anything involves planning, organising, implementing, controlling and finally reviewing.

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About the author
Linda Young was the Information Security Manager and continuity plan holder for an international company for over 20 years. She is currently writing a practical resource manual to be published in 2013, which is designed for dental practices looking to improve their team’s management skills.